

# An anarchist woman doctor. A biographical approach

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Antonina RODRIGO. *Una mujer libre: Amparo Poch y Gascón, médica anarquista*, Barcelona, Flor del Viento Ediciones, 2002, 300 pp., ISBN: 84-89644-76-4.

Antonina RODRIGO. *Amparo Poch y Gascón: Textos de una médica libertaria*, Zaragoza, Diputación de Zaragoza, 2002, 299 pp., ISBN: 84-9703-013-3.

These two companion texts are an attempt to capture the life and work of one of the many unsung female participants in the early twentieth-century labour movement in Spain. The author, Antonina Rodrigo, has an extensive track record of publications on women who participated in the social struggles in the first three decades of the twentieth century and the Civil War, many of whom were forced into exile fleeing the triumphant forces of Nationalist Spain.

In these two texts, the focus is on Zaragoza-born medical doctor Amparo Poch y Gascón. Their publication in 2002 marks the centenary of the birth of this remarkable woman who from her time as one of the very few female students in the Zaragoza University Medicine Faculty through to her last days in exile in France wrote for and actively professed the rights of women, the construction of a new set of values for social life and, from the mid-1920s overtly supported the anarchist cause.

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This combination was by no means unique in the period and is a testimony to the highly politicised circumstances of the time, the commitment of workers from a broad variety of backgrounds and professions to a revolutionary cause as well as the organisational flexibility and perspicacity of the anarchist movement. The anarchist movement in its various forms and principally in its anarcho-syndicalist variety, the CNT (Confederación Nacional del Trabajo), became host to a large array of concerns ranging from union building to the critique of the medical establishment, from the articulation of «alternative» forms of medicine to the use of Esperanto. The presence of doctors in this extraordinary movement can be seen in the pages of practically any libertarian review of the time but is most evident in the publications which sprung up in the Catalan and Valencian regions in the 1920s and 1930s. Articles abound which are signed by figures such as Isaac Puente, Roberto Remartínez and Félix Martí Ibáñez.

Antonina Rodrigo sets out to record the life and writings of Poch in two volumes which respond to different remits. The first text, *Una Mujer Libre*, is a more general biography of Amparo Poch, detailing her childhood, life in the University, early activism in student groups and entry into the CNT and anarchist women's organisation «Mujeres Libres» in 1936. During the Civil War she helped to establish the Hogares Infantiles set up by Mujeres Libres with CNT help and the Casal de la Dona Treballadora, which offered women courses and training in numerous fields during the Civil War. The second volume is introduced by a brief overview of Poch's life and thought but is principally devoted to the reproduction of period texts which range from materials pertinent to feminism, free love, medicine, poetry and the short novel, *Amor*, that Poch published in 1923.

The same year that Poch published her idealist *Amor* was marked by the beginning of her medical studies and she was to graduate as one of the four women out of 523 students with whom she had begun her studies. Throughout her University career Poch had to struggle against the stifling male chauvinism of both fellow students and professors. Rebelling against the separation of men and women in different study rooms in the University, Poch became renowned for her outspoken criticism of injustice in the ambit of the University. Slowly she gained

similar fame in the city itself as her writings and poems appeared in the local press.

Like many socially aware medical practitioners, once Poch graduated she established a clinic in Zaragoza in 1929. This clinic provided medical advice and care at a reduced rate for female workers. Her specialism and area of principal interest rapidly became women's health and much of her work was oriented towards the science of bringing up children (called «puericulture» at the time), discussions of free love, of which Poch was an advocate and practitioner, and general issues of sexuality.

Of most direct interest to the audience of this review will be the medical texts which appeared in a variety of publications from the anarchist *Tiempos Nuevos* to the libertarian women's review *Mujeres Libres*. In these reviews and elsewhere Poch concentrated on women's health, reproduction and the scourges of the time in the form of tuberculosis, syphilis and other venereal diseases. For example, her handbook *Cartilla de Consejos a las Madres* written for the Junta Provincial de Protección a la Infancia in 1931 contained sections on pregnancy, gestation, nutrition, general hygiene and breast feeding. One objective of this text was the «naturalization» of pregnancy and birth, and the demystification of the processes. Considering the ignorance of most women about their bodies in the period, this was certainly a laudable aim and a necessary undertaking. Early on in the text, for example, Poch writes: «Ni el temor ni la alegría excesivas deben acompañar al embarazo normal, único de que trataremos en estas cuartillas de vulgarización. El embarazo es un hecho completamente fisiológico, si bien muchos de los fenómenos que durante él se presentan están en las fronteras de lo morboso y lo serían fuera de la gestación» (*Textos*, p. 152). While Poch was keen to reassure women that childbirth was a «normal», «natural» process she also signalled the presence of possible morbidity and the dangers to be guarded against, in physical and psychical terms.

This drawing of boundaries between the normal and the pathological was characteristic of the medical texts of this and other periods and was especially the case in writings on sexuality. Such concerns were carried over into the anarchist press, where medical doctors and

others constantly tried to naturalise much of what had been considered deviant practice or practice that was thought to be ill-advised from a medical point of view. While this resulted in a broader range of practices considered acceptable, with practices such as «free love» or masturbation brought into the fold, in reality what was performed was a shifting of boundaries, not the elimination of the concept of the «pathological».

While Poch advocated and practised «free love», that is relationships outside of the rites of Catholicism, her writings on the relationship between womanhood and children will now appear much more conservative. In the texts reproduced here, for example, we do not hear a critical voice regarding the «natural» obligation of women to reproduce. Instead, there is an exaltation of the mother's role as child bearer and carer in terms that we would now think rather trite and overly sentimental. The baby, for instance, is spoken of in the following terms: «He aquí el niño, menudo y de color de rosa; torpe, llorón y encantador. He aquí el niño, el esperado y el temido; el anhelado y el que saltó sobre los obstáculos; el alborozo y el cálculo deshecho; el gozo supremo y el miedo sin fin; la serenidad gloriosa y la responsabilidad consciente» (*Textos*, 186). Of course, such was the language of the times and it was current not only in the progressive medical field but also in the anarchist movement; it was a way of bringing medical insights to the general population.

This kind of message and language informed Poch's creation, «Dr. Salud Alegre», a column in *Mujeres Libres* which presented in a light manner advice on various matters connected to general health. Some of these excursions reached somewhat surreal proportions, as witnessed by the «Marriage Factory» that churned out unthinking couples who had no statutory right of complaint after the event. Amusing but not frivolous, this kind of direct and creative portrayal of a message was quite probably successful.

What we do not see in the texts reproduced here, nevertheless, is much evidence of an anarchist outlook. There is not the explicit critique of capitalism as the progenitor of social chaos and ill-health contained in the combative writings of Isaac Puente or Félix Martí Ibáñez. What is also lacking in these two books is any critical framework

provided by the author. The all too common praise of figures that were involved in the anarchist movement for their progressive views, their commitment to working-class causes and for their self-sacrifice for the cause, is repeated here. That these qualities are laudatory ones is beyond doubt. But the fact that Poch reproduced gender stereotypes with respect to women and childbirth and that she advocated a form of «eugenics» as part of her philosophy of health are stances that, today, must be critiqued. That Poch perhaps did not do so explicitly in her time is understandable, but for Rodrigo to follow suit seventy years later is an omission that weakens the effectiveness of both texts.